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Monitoring Report

*A review of the B&H
media published by Media
Plan and the Institute for
War & Peace Reporting
Volume 3 • Issue 1
July 12 1997*

RS Media In The Maelstrom

SRT Fails The Test

In periods of crisis journalists and their media display their greatest strengths or failings. The eruption of the bickering between Republika Srpska's President Biljana Plavsic and the Pale-dominated wing of the SDS, led by Radovan Karadzic and Momcilo Krajisnik, into full-scale political warfare put the media in Republika Srpska, and Srpska Radio and Television (SRT) in particular, to the test.

Independent media covered the crisis with varying degrees of accuracy, but it was interesting to see how SRT, which from its inception in 1992 has served largely as a mouthpiece for the ruling Serb Democratic Party (SDS) would deal with a serious split within that party. Would the conflict prompt SRT's reporters and editors to cover the crisis objectively, giving both Plavsic's and the SDS' positions equal consideration, and letting viewers and letting the audience decide who was right or wrong? The answer, unfortunately, was no.

From the beginning of the conflict, SRT showed itself to be slavishly

devoted to SDS-Pale's positions and pronouncements, and unremittingly hostile to the president. The journalists and editors in Pale failed in almost every basic journalistic criteria. While Plavsic was, after complaining, given some coverage on the evening news, the stories in which she was featured, or given a chance to explain her position, were preceded by numerous stories in which SDS officials or journalists attacked her.

SRT failed to report that the president of the republic had been detained, or why she had entered into the conflict in the first place. In the midst of a political and constitutional crisis, in which both sides tossed references to the constitution at each other like grenades, no one at SRT apparently bothered to read the document themselves. If they did, they didn't share it with their audience. There was no attempt at an independent, objective analysis of either position, only sycophantic repetition of one, and bristling hostility to the other.

SRT insists it is a politically independent, professional broadcaster,

and therefore it should be judged by professional, not political standards. Unfortunately for its audience, while SRT produced some pretty good propaganda, it failed to meet even the lowest standards of professional journalism. Given the scope of this failure and its importance in the context of the ongoing political struggle in the RS and the future of Bosnia, we have decided to dedicate a large portion of this issue to SRT's coverage of the current crisis.

The crisis began on 27 June, when Plavsic ordered the suspension of interior minister Dragan Kijac for, among other things, disobeying her orders on police co-operation with the international community in Brcko, and failing to investigate corruption in the government and police forces. She also ordered the RS Brcko police under her direct control, and reversed Kijac's orders to disband certain special police units in the RS.

MONITORING REPORT

Published by the
Institute for War & Peace Reporting and
Media Plan

Project Director: Zlatko Dizdarevic

IWPR is an independent conflict-monitoring and media-support charity working to inform the international debate on conflict and provide a platform and other support for voices of moderation caught in conflict.



Media Plan is an independent organisation monitoring, training and developing the Bosnian media.



MEDIA PLAN

Monitoring Report is free of charge, and reprinting with credit is encouraged. IWPR and Media Plan gratefully acknowledge the support of the Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency (SIDA) for support for this project. Other media training, development and research projects carried out by Media Plan and IWPR in Bosnia are supported by the European Union, US Information Agency, National Endowment for Democracy and Winston Foundation for World Peace.

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The 7:30 newscast *Novosti* neglected to mention her orders. Even in the following days, when SRT broadcast government and interior ministry attacks on Plavsic for issuing "unconstitutional," decisions on Brcko and the personnel issues neither the officials nor the reporters made any mention of the most important order-Kijac's suspension. Plavsic's office was never given an opportunity to explain her decisions.

In most countries' media, news that the president has been arrested by police of a neighbouring state would be considered a big story, and the president's version of events rather important. But before reporting that Plavsic had been detained at Belgrade airport on the previous evening, 30 June's *Novosti* ran the Serb member of Bosnia's joint presidency, (and chairman of the board of SRT) Momcilo Krajisnik's denial that Plavsic had been detained. It then went on to cover Krajisnik's meetings with international officials on unrelated issues. Following these came a story quoting a report by Agence France Presse that former RS president Radovan Karadzic does not support Plavsic's policies, and believes she may jeopardise the survival of the RS by her "subservience" to the international community.

Only after this balanced introduction, and thirteen minutes into the broadcast, did a reporter read Plavsic's statement giving her account of her arrest. Rather than attempting any real analysis of the situation, or trying to contact Plavsic or a spokesman by telephone, the reporter spent the remainder of the broadcast attacking the president, insinuating that she is a tool of the international community.

The presenter commented that her "statement, nevertheless, never states that the President of RS was picked up in Bijeljina by SFOR special units and taken to Banja Luka. . . . SFOR has therefore acted outside of its mandate and interfered with internal affairs of RS." He concluded that "the intention of such an act is to confront the President of RS with other state institutions."

To her assertion that recent events in RS represented a coup d'etat by

Karadzic, *Novosti* declared this "entirely illogical, since Dr. Radovan Karadzic transferred all his powers to Mrs. Plavsic even before the elections."

As for Plavsic's claims that she was being prevented from addressing the public through the state media, the presenter remarked that the "President of the RS deceives the public." Indeed, the programme specifically criticised her for giving her version of her story about returning from London to independent Radio B92 in Belgrade, rather than to SRT.

Srpski Radio neglected to mention Plavsic on 30 June.

SRT's *Novosti* on July 1st again gave the president second billing to the meeting of the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) main board, which called on Plavsic to return to Pale from her office in Banja Luka, or resign. SRT broadcast pictures of Plavsic's press conference, but instead of running excerpts of the president's statements, the reporter provided his own summary of the proceedings. Nevertheless, it was the first time viewers had been given any hint that Plavsic had tried to suspend minister Kijac. The reporter also detailed Plavsic's accusations of corruption in the police and government, and details on the companies Centrex and Selekt-Impex.

Rather than attacking Plavsic directly, SRT left the job to an editorial from the next day's issue of the state-controlled *Glas Srpski*, which was read in its entirety. As usual, SRT did not pursue the story with any independent reporting or analysis.

Immediately following the evening newscast, SRT broadcast Plavsic's 45-minute address to the people of Republika Srpska in which she gave her version of events from June 27th onwards, and provided even more details on corruption.

July 2nd's *Novosti* repeated the previous day's pattern, first with an ultimatum from the SDS main board, and a response and more accusations from Plavsic. This evening SRT attacked supporters of Plavsic. Reporting that the RS Independent Social Democrats had called on Plavsic to dissolve the parliament, the presenter said that the party leader Milorad Dodik "has once again proved that those struggling for power will stop at nothing even at the cost of

having chaos and anarchy in the country." Strangely, SRT chose to close the broadcast with the news that on the night of July 1, SFOR troops had sealed off the area of Banja Luka around the presidency, and patrolled in force.

The next day, *Novosti* was preceded by the statement "Tonight's news program will be broadcast from the TV studio in Sarajevo [Serb Sarajevo, A.K.A. Pale] because editors at TV Centre in Banja Luka are being pressured and blackmailed to follow instructions issued by the office of the RS President. RS officials have decided to broadcast programmes from TV Centre in Sarajevo until further notice." There were no further explanations.

When the coverage resumed from the Banja Luka studio the next day, viewers were greeted by an unfamiliar presenter. According to SRT sources, ten staff from SRT Banja Luka had suddenly decided to take their vacations.

As in previous days, SRT displayed lousy news sense. *Novosti* began with Plavsic's letter to the speaker of the RS parliament, asking his position with regard to the dissolution of the assembly. It then broadcast Momcilo Krajisnik's written warning to Plavsic not to dissolve parliament, followed by appeals from Orthodox clergy and Serbs in the Diaspora for the RS leadership to kiss and make up. Only then, a third of the way through the broadcast, did the presenter announce that "despite numerous appeals," Plavsic had ordered the parliament dissolved, and called new elections.

Instead of analysing the reasons behind Plavsic's decision, *Novosti* reminded viewers who really gave Plavsic her job. Showing archival material on her promotion to acting president last year, the presenter intoned: "These were the times when the leader of Serb people had to be removed due to pressure of international community, but not from its people." The clip was spiced up with a loud recording of the ovation "Give our regards to Rasa!" using a nickname for Karadzic.

On July 4th the parliament session went ahead despite Plavsic's orders, and *Novosti* dedicated virtually the entire program to delegates' attacks on the president. No time was designated to

Plavsic's replies, or to the opinions of the opposition parties in Banja Luka which had rallied behind her. *Novosti* also neglected to report the rally of support for Plavsic in Banja Luka that took place that afternoon, although the 10:00 PM broadcast did carry the news.

In earlier programs, *Novosti* had broadcast attacks on Plavsic for revealing "classified" documents regarding police and government corruption. But on July 6th, the presenter read out in its entirety a "classified" letter supposedly from the VRS chief of staff, general Pero Colic, warning of the military dangers for the RS posed by the crisis. There was no mention of the fact that the letter appeared to contradict Colic's public statements from a few days before in which he said that the army would remain out of the political fray, or how suspiciously close its demands and warnings were to those of the SDS main board in Pale.

After reporting the fact that Plavsic had failed to appear at a meeting with Krajisnik in Bijeljina, the presenter then spent the majority of the segment attacking the president, warning viewers that "the general opinion is that President Plavsic has taken the road of no return by giving statements to the media in the beginning, and organising rallies....Isn't the RS President objectively in support of destabilisation of the country and driving it towards chaos?...If Mrs. Plavsic is not aware of her dangerous and unconstitutional acts, then it must be publicly said that she is acting irresponsibly and that the country and the people must be defended from her and her mistakes so that we do not have to defend ourselves from foreign forces which could soon turn against us, taking advantage of this chaos."

This must be the first instance in the history of journalism that a reporter has attacked a politician for talking to the media.

Plavsic was given no opportunity to comment on the letter from the army, or the cancelled Bijeljina meeting, until the second to last item of the next day's (7/7) newscast, and only after a series of reports from the parliament and government which savaged her in what by then had become a familiar pattern.

Srpski Radio pretty much mimicked the techniques and mistakes of the television, although they relied more heavily on references from "some foreign media" and "traditionally friendly" Greek media, to prove their point against Plavsic.

The Rest of the Press

Independent Television (NTV) Banja Luka, gave local viewers an alternative news source to SRT, and focused on Plavsic's activities and her accusations against Karadzic and SDS Pale. NTV put particular emphasis on the views of the opposition parties which came out in support of Plavsic.

While NTV provided a balance to SRT's one sided coverage, it tended to go overboard in its support for her, with its reporters often mixing commentary with reporting. Following a report from a Banja Luka rally in support of Plavsic, on July 5, one of the station's presenters declared emotionally, "Let God bless our President. We are all with her."

Much of Glas Srpski's coverage followed the lead of SRT. During the monitored period, *Glas Srpski* covered Plavsic 19 times—16 times with negative connotations. Krajisnik appeared 11 times, always in a positive context.

As the crisis unfolded, *Dnevne Nezavisne Novine* (Daily independent Newspaper, or DNN) provided RS readers with the most informative, consistent, and balanced coverage of any of the RS dailies. Its weekly magazine (8/7) gave readers their first look at and analysis of the documentation Plavsic released supporting her charges of corruption on the part of the police and the government.

DNN must have been saving the good stuff for the magazine, because towards the end of the week, most of the Banja Luka news room seemed to be on vacation, judging from its coverage of the crisis. In the midst of the biggest story in RS since the end of war, over three days (July 4-6), the paper's own reporters, based, after all, in Banja Luka, managed to produce only one interview with Plavsic, and about 10 cm of text about an

upcoming rally. News agency reports (Beta, SRNA, AIM) from Pale and Banja Luka formed the backbone of DNN's coverage during that period, supplemented by complete reprints of Plavsic's statements and declarations.

Alternativa deserves a pat on the back for its coverage of the crisis. Readers in Doboj were given a balanced selection of mostly agency stories, giving information about events in both Pale and Banja Luka. Alternativa made pains to provide quotes from both sides of the political battlefield. It also published a special insert, containing the full text of Plavsic's address to the nation from July 3rd.

Unfortunately, Alternativa failed to report on reactions to the crisis in Doboj. The logical question for readers would have been the positions of local SDS and opposition politicians on the Plavsic-Pale conflict.

Serbian state TV failed to provide any meaningful coverage of the political conflict in the RS, or of the participation of Radovan Karadzic in the events. The international community's support for Plavsic was never mentioned. Despite having a correspondent in Banja Luka, RTS's evening Dnevnik for July 3 was limited to a short item on Plavsic's decision to dissolve the Parliament and call new elections.

TV BiH did a pretty good job of covering the RS political crisis- once it finally managed to get around to it. It missed the boat on June 30th, running the reports of Plavsic's detention in Belgrade ten minutes into the newscast. Her press conference in Banja Luka on July 1st got similar treatment, running after boring pieces on the adventures of Gelbard and Izetbegovic, Mostar, and a financial story.

Typically, TV BiH's interest increased on July 2nd, only when Plavsic was mentioned at length in a holiday Inn press conference. Her dissolution of the parliament on July 3rd was covered only in the midst of a story about a Reuters report on an SRT report on supposed NATO orders to arrest Karadzic and Mladic.

Ironically, TV BiH's placement of Plavsic coverage mirrored that of SRT. The only difference was that

where SRT's placement of stories appeared designed to give the SDS a chance to attack Plavsic before she got her say, TV BiH seemed to have displayed plain old bad judgement in how important the story actually was. Relying heavily on foreign wire services, the coverage was fairly neutral, but there was never any attempt to explain to viewers why events in RS might be important to them. As the crisis progressed, TV BiH presenters suddenly began describing Plavsic as "the moderate wing of the SDS."

TV BiH normally covers the RS parliament sessions in Pale, but on July 4th it boycotted the meeting along with the representatives of the SDA, UBSD, and the Party for BiH, with whom it normally hitches a ride from Sarajevo. If it they had attended the session, the presenter might not have misreported that Socialist Party delegates had come to the assembly.

The best reporting of the crisis by Bosnian broadcasters was that of TVINFO and NTV Studio 99, whose balanced coverage of both sides of the issue gave its audience a clear picture of what was really going on. Studio 99 in particular used all its resources to get the story, with wire services (including BETA), archive material, and phone-ins from Banja Luka and Belgrade. Unlike other federation broadcasters, Studio 99 put the RS story at or near the top of the newscast every night, with detailed reports from Banja Luka. Unfortunately the connections were so bad that the reports, sometimes lasting as long as 20 minutes, were often incomprehensible.

TVIN even produced two half-hour specials on the crisis and the demonstrations of support for Plavsic in Banja Luka. (6/7, 8/7)

Alija At Ajvatovica

TV BiH holds firm to the ancient South Slav tradition of covering its presidents', in this case, Alija Izetbegovic's every move with slavish dedication. The most recent opportunity to exercise that tradition was the TV's coverage (25/6; 28/6;

29/6) of his participation on the Ajvatovica pilgrimage.

While the almost 500-year-old Islamic pilgrimage and Bosnjak cultural exhibition was certainly worthy of coverage, did it really need to run for three days at the top of the news? Izetbegovic was portrayed as being at the heart of the pilgrimage, which with the proliferation of SDA flags, could have easily been confused with a party rally.

Mostar

TV Herceg-Bosna actually quoted a non-Croat politician in a story on the Federation. The bad news is the reporter didn't pay much attention to what they said. Mehmed Zilic, Federation Minister for Internal Affairs was quoted on the question of the division of the Mostar Canton. The presenter said that Zilic's version of BiH did not recognise the existence of Croats in his version of Bosnia and Herzegovina. But in Zilic's actual statement, as broadcast, there was nothing that could have led to such a conclusion.

An earlier report said, "Look at the case of Travnik, and the daily maltreatment of Croats in Bugojno . . . when will the international leaders want to take another view in their judgement of who is responsible for the non-implementation of the Dayton agreement?" (2/7).

The reporter obviously had not looked too hard at the case of Travnik. There are definitely problems for Croats in Bugojno, but according to international officials, more than 7,000 Croats have returned to villages around Travnik in the past year.

TVHB was even less pleased with US envoy Robert Gelbard's frequent references to Mostar's 'Mafiosi' and high level of organised crime. The reporter told viewers, "It is strange that Gelbard speaks of Mostar as a criminal capital . . . according to the words of leading members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the Herzegovina-Neretva area, this is the fruit of insinuation and misinformation" (3/7).

Croatian Radio Herceg Bosna

When 5 Bosniak families returned to Stolac as the spearhead of a UNHCR pilot project, HRHB's reporter described "the entry of Muslim women into the town obviously incapable of suppressing their emotions, crying that this would be a Muslim country, and could be reformed as an Islamic country. It is clear that the Muslim government instructed the returnees on how they could increase tensions." (27/6). This report sounded as though the reporter was obviously incapable of suppressing his imagination.

HTV Mostar vs. TV Mostar

Not a single Bosniak leader appeared on Hrvatska Televizija Mostar (HTV) at any point during the monitored period. The only Croat party mentioned was the HDZ.

TV Mostar had a corresponding approach, concentrating heavily on the SDA to the exclusion of all other parties. A heavily-attended SDP conference in Mostar was not mentioned.

Dnevni Avaz

[Dnevni Avaz had a report about the meeting of the Federation parliament representatives and their discussion of the formation of the Hercegovacka-Neretva Canton titled "If the New Municipalities Can't Be Constituted, Division Will Result." But the actual text contained nothing that justified the headline.](#)

[Avaz also surveyed the motives for blockading the joint activities of the federation, under the title, The Silent Blockade. The gist of this was that Croat members of Federation bodies were responsible for blockading the decision on the Hercegovacka-Neretva canton. It concluded: "Croats ruin agreement." Both articles made it seem, by saying 'the Croats did/said this/that' as if the entire Croat nation was](#)

[responsible for the problems, not just certain representatives \(25/7\).](#)

BRCKO: Fried Farrand

The press on both sides of the IEHL in Brcko seems to think they have Deputy High Representative Robert Farrand, on the run, literally.

On Radio Slobodna Brcko's program "Special Guest" (25/6) editor in chief Admir Kadric, orchestrated a not-so-funny roasting for Farrand. Typical questions were: "Weren't you under the strong influence of Carl Bildt and the Serb lobby?" "Are you a supervisor, or an implementer of Serb decisions?"

Kadic wanted to know whether the decision that returnees must carry RS documents meant giving Bosniaks the status of Jews in World War II Germany. The inquisition drove an obviously upset Farrand to an outburst: "You are attacking the international community, which actually came to help you and the Serbs to live together in Brcko. Help us and we will help you."

Farrand then told listeners that he couldn't answer any more questions as it was already late and he had to get back to Brcko. Kadric then suggested that the Supervisor's hasty departure meant he intended avoiding the studio in the future.

One wonders why. It is unclear what listeners learned about Farrand's views on the current situation or future of Brcko, but they certainly learned Kadric's views on Farrand.

Tip for journalists: Terrorising the most important international official in your area on live radio reduces your chances of getting good information out of his office in the future.

An interview with Robert Farrand, in Glas Srpski (28/6), was interesting only for the commentary of the reporter, who noted that Farrand, "obviously upset, left immediately after being asked about Mostar; unacceptable behaviour from a diplomatic chief in his own office."

TVZenica - Tales of Two Cities

On the newscast 'Zenica Today' (24/6) the HVO (Croat Defence Council), which controls Jajce was blamed for the current state of the town. The reporter stated, without quoting sources, "The people of Jajce now need more social help than people living outside the country or those living in areas under BiH army control...slowly but irrevocably they are losing their property and their town....Jajce is dying, like its symbol, the waterfall of Pliva."

These comments were dramatically illustrated, not with interviews or pictorial evidence of social hardship, but with a bleak picture of the ruined waterfall mined during Serb occupation.

The camera was supposed to demonstrate a similar state of affairs in Banja Luka, described as a 'tragic town' in the informative/political programme 'Ogledalo', (Fridays, 21.00 - 22.00) by presenter Medina Delibasic (27/6).

Her text evoked a depressed town, under a repressive regime. Her sources were unnamed 'people who have been there and who say..' Meanwhile the camera was showing lively and well-dressed young people promenading in the tree-and café-lined main street of Gospodska.

It's Your Civic Duty. Or Else...

"Registration is the most important patriotic and national goal. On your votes depend your future and the future of Brcko!" *Jingle, aired before every newscast and every programme related to registration on SRT Brcko.*

"Just by registering, a Mostar citizen becomes a defender of united Mostar." *TV Mostar, 24/6.*

Whoever does not register is not a true citizen of Mostar... Everybody should register, and everybody should vote for the SDA, for that is our only chance for survival." *TV Mostar, 23/6.*

Dear Colleagues: Are you worried that your paper or station wasn't

*mentioned above? Don't worry, it
probably will be.*